

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

4TH DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

CONSTITUENT SERVICE CENTERS:

1540 Kuser Road, Suite A9
Hamilton, NJ 08619-3828
(609) 585-7878
TTY (609) 585-3650

108 Lacey Road, Suite 38A
Whiting, NJ 08759-1331
(732) 350-2300

2373 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-3004
(202) 225-3765



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

April 14, 2004

COMMITTEES:

VETERANS' AFFAIRS
CHAIRMAN

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
VICE CHAIRMAN

**COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND
COOPERATION IN EUROPE**
CHAIRMAN

The Honorable John Boehner
Chairman
House Committee on Education and the Workforce
2181 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable George Miller
Ranking Member
House Committee on Education and the Workforce
2101 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Boehner and Ranking Member Miller:

As the Co-Founders and Co-Chairmen of the Congressional Coalition on Autism Research and Education (CARE), which counts more than 180 members of the House and Senate as members, we are writing to urge your consideration of legislation we wrote that can significantly improve education results for the rising number of school-age children who suffer from autism. It is our hope that after reviewing our bill, you will work with us to find a suitable legislative vehicle for moving it through the House this year.

The legislation to which we are referring is **HR 1700: The Teacher Education for Autistic Children (TEACH) Act**. Introduced last year, the TEACH Act currently has 65 cosponsors from both political parties, and it continues to gain additional supporters. The legislation is strongly supported by the Autism Society of America, the nation's largest and oldest advocacy group for the autistic community, as well as several other advocacy groups that represent autistic persons and their families.

The TEACH Act is a collaborative effort that is the result of years of careful work and study. The paramount objective of HR 1700 is to ameliorate the nationwide shortage of teachers that are autism-literate by using financial incentives to place thousands of well-qualified teachers into the classrooms. In 2001, the National Research Council released its groundbreaking and comprehensive study entitled "Educating Children with Autism." A major focus of the study was the state of autism-teacher education and the qualifications possessed by teachers who work with these students. The report noted that "one of the clear needs in the field of autism is to increase the number of well-prepared professionals to work with children and their families."¹

¹National Research Council. *Educating Children with Autism*. Washington: National Academy Press, 2001.

The report went on to recommend that "relevant state and federal agencies institute an agenda for upgrading personnel preparation for those who work with, and are responsible for, children with autistic spectrum disorders and their families."² Specifically, the study recommended that the federal government fund training and continuing education initiatives for teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school employees who work with autistic students.

HR 1700 was specifically crafted to meet the recommendations of the National Research Council's report. We are thankful for your committee's help including two specific references to autism in HR 1350: the Improving Results for Children with Disabilities Act of 2003. However, the autism epidemic continues to increase, adding thousands of new students in our schools each year. Our government needs to make an all-out effort by ensuring these students receive the education they need to live fuller lives.

Right now, about 1 of every 250 Americans is living with either autism or an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Nearly 120,000 students with autism were enrolled in our nation's schools last year, up from only 20,000 less than 10 years ago. Every state has been deeply affected. For instances, the number of autism cases reported to the California Department of Developmental Services doubled over the past four years, and increased by more than 630 percent over the past 15 years. Nationwide, the U.S. Department of Education estimates the autism rates are increasing by 10 to 17 percent each year, meaning the number of Americans with autism could spike to four million within 10 years. Our school districts are being deluged by children with special needs, and yet the teachers are not being given the specialized training needed to properly educate these students.

Our nation is in the midst of an autism crisis that becomes more severe each passing month, a crisis that costs our nation tens of billions of dollars annually in education, therapy, special child care, adult services, research projects, and other initiatives needed to care for these individuals. While we have significantly increased our government's commitment to surveillance and biomedical research in a strong effort to find a cause or cure, we must do more to educate and train those people already living with autism so they can lead more productive lives.

Thankfully, a substantial body of research has shown that early education and therapeutic interventions from qualified teachers and professionals do make a significant difference in helping a child with ASD live a more complete life. With the proper education and therapies, students with ASD have a greater potential for becoming adults capable of holding a job, earning income, and maybe even living independently. Many of these adults will be able to contribute to our economy. But if they do not get the proper therapy and education, their care will likely costs

² National Research Council. *Educating Children with Autism*. Washington: National Academy Press, 2001.

tens of thousands of dollars a year. By authorizing the provisions of HR 1700, we will help improve life for those with autism and also save our government billions over the coming years.

The centerpiece of the TEACH Act are provisions that would authorize specific federal funds (\$20 million a year) for teacher training and development and technical assistance to states and school districts. This money will help train and retrain teachers, paraprofessionals, and others who work with autistic students; help school districts develop, expand, and enhance their programs and curricula for autistic students; and develop a body of best practices for teaching students with autism.

We strongly believe that this goal of the TEACH Act complements the stated ideal of the **No Child Left Behind** law, which states that "every state should have a well-prepared teacher in every classroom by the end of the 2005-2006 school year. A prepared teacher knows what to teach, how to teach, and has command of the subject matter being taught."³

Another key component is a loan forgiveness program that will help attract more qualified and well-intentioned professionals to teach students with autism. To be eligible for the loans, a person would have to serve as a qualified teacher of autistic students for at least three years. If approved, they would receive up to \$5,000 a year to help repay college loans. While HR 438: The Teacher Recruitment and Retention Act includes a loan forgiveness program for special education teachers, it does not specifically apply for teachers of autistic students. If we are to encourage more people to specifically take up autism education as a vocation and push institutions of higher education to develop more autism-specific programs, we must provide financial incentives to do so. Considering the unique nature of autism, the special needs of the students, and the rapidly-growing numbers, we strongly feel our government needs to have a more aggressive response to the autism epidemic.

Other components of the bill include the establishment of State Autism Ombudsman Offices that would help families of autistic children obtain the services they need from private, non-profit, local, state, and federal sources. The offices would serve as a central clearinghouse for families who are seeking information about services, education, and other resources they will need to provide a better quality of life for their children.

The bill also requires a joint Department of Labor/Department of Education study to evaluate existing vocational programs available for people with autism, among other things. This provision would help ensure that people with autism will have better opportunities to find and hold quality jobs so they can live fuller lives once completing school and becoming adults. This

³ U.S. Department of Education *No Child Left Behind* page. The Facts About Good Teachers.
<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/teachers/teachers.html>.

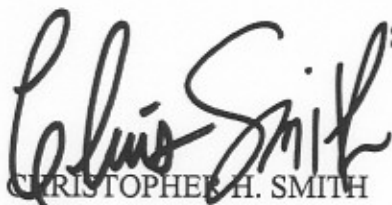
The Honorable John Boehner/The Honorable George Miller


April 14, 2004

Page 4

study will help move us forward to our goal of attaining a state of greater self-sufficiency and independence for people with autism.

As Chairmen and Ranking Member of the Education and the Workforce Committee, we know that you share our commitment to improve schools for all students, especially those with disabilities such as autism. To ensure these precious children are not overlooked, we respectfully request that you work with us to find a suitable bill or bills to which we may be able to attach provisions of TEACH, or possibly hold a markup session for HR 1700. If you have any questions on this matter, please do not hesitate to contact us or Nick Manetto with Rep. Smith at 225-3765 or Mike Mullen with Rep. Doyle at 225-2135.

 Sincerely,
CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH
Member of Congress


MIKE DOYLE
Member of Congress